



## COLUMNISTS

*The Kibitzer*

Tim Harding

## The Chess Career of King Canute - or not?

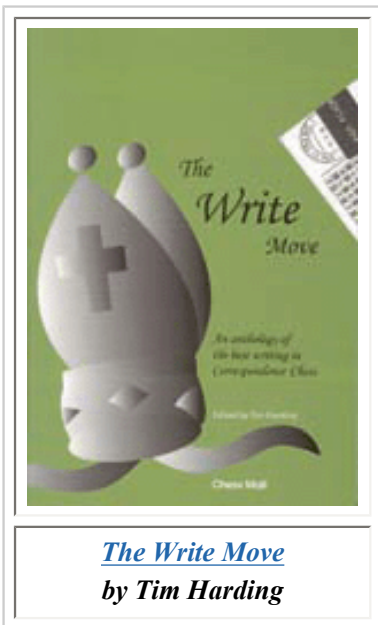
In [Kibitzer 130](#) a few months ago, I briefly mentioned the hoary old story about King Canute playing chess and promised to come back to it. August traditionally being the “silly season,” I am doing that now. Yet there is some solid research behind the article and at the end there is a genuine nugget of chess history – although it has nothing to do with Canute, I am afraid.

The best-known legend about the eleventh century King Canute (as he’s popularly known in England) is that he made his courtiers put a throne on the beach, from where he commanded the waves to turn back and leave his feet dry. The tide did not oblige, forcing Canute & Co. to beat a hasty retreat. Children are meant to take the moral from this that Canute was an arrogant fool. Revisionists say that the real meaning of the story was that Canute, being very well aware that his command would not be obeyed, set up this scenario to teach his flattering courtiers that even a king’s power was limited by nature and God.

*King Canute commands the waves*

This story of course has nothing to do with chess, but there are many other stories about this king, some of them presumably based on fact, and one of them includes a game, which may or may not have been chess. To begin at the beginning, who was King Canute and when did he live?

Knutr the Great, King of Denmark and England, was indeed a real historical person, whose name is variously written “Canute,” “Cnut,” “Knut,” “Knud” or “Knutr”; take your pick. I will call him Canute in this article, as that’s what I was taught as a kid and it’s easier than trying to arbitrate between several more authentic Nordic versions. He was probably born around the year 995 of the Christian era (for uncertainties over years, see below) and died in 1035 AD. He ruled the Kingdom of Denmark from 1018 and became King of England around 1016. So he was one of the last Anglo-Saxon/ Danish rulers; there were only a few more after him before the Norman Conquest, which as everyone knows was in 1066.

*The Write Move*  
by Tim Harding

Trying to rule over two separate kingdoms separated by a lot of stormy sea was a tricky job as there was no Ryanair a thousand years ago to bring Canute rapidly from one to the other. There would always be a danger of rebellion, more likely (as it turned out) in Denmark than in England. This did not seem to make him anxious, however. He even took a long trip, to Rome, lasting several months, during his double reign, entrusting the rule of the two kingdoms to (hopefully) loyal nobles. The one left in charge in Denmark was Earl (or Jarl) Wolf (or Úlf or Ulfr).

Wolf is sometimes stated to be a brother-in-law of Canute, but that does not appear to be correct. He was a powerful man nevertheless, with royal connections himself in England. His sister was married to Earl Godwin; two of their sons (his grandsons) were the future King Harald and Earl Tosti (Tostig Godwinson); their daughter was Gyda, wife of Edward the Confessor. So Wolf was related to the two kings of England who followed Canute. However that did not save him from the fate which is now about to be related, which is where the chess (or pseudo-chess) comes in.

The story is mentioned in Fiske's *Chess in Iceland* and often repeated. There seems little doubt that the King did have Earl Wolf murdered (what is more, by a hit-man in a church) but whether it was because of a row over a board game of any kind is not proven, and if it was a board game, it is still an open question whether it could have been medieval chess. Last year I spent about two days trying to get to the bottom of this question and consulted some scholars.

The story, as told in *Olafs Saga Helga* ("Story of Olaf the Holy") by the Icelandic saga writer Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241), goes something like this. Hearing of some problems in his northern kingdom, Canute decided to pay a surprise home visit and sailed from England in the early autumn with a substantial fleet. Arriving at Roskilde in Denmark, he meets up with Wolf who has been running the show in his absence, and after dinner they sit down to a game of chess. Canute makes a blunder, and when Wolf takes his knight, the king asks to take his move back. Wolf refuses, which understandably makes the king angry. Who's the boss, after all? A game is maybe only a game, but Wolf should be showing him respect.

Canute decides to have Wolf killed, but there is some difficulty finding anyone willing to do this. It is a holy day and everyone is going to church, Christianity being a fairly recent innovation in Denmark. (While preparing this article, I noted that Wikipedia wrongly set the story at Christmas-time.) Canute eventually asks one of his housecarls (bodyguard) who is a Norwegian and therefore perhaps not a Christian. This man goes into the church and slays Wolf in front of all the worshippers. As penance, Canute pays for some new churches and monasteries. Of course this is not the first or only time somebody has supposedly been killed over a game of chess. But was it chess?

### **The Story According to Murray**

The great chess historian Harold Murray was fascinated by this story. He definitely believed it could hold a clue to the date of transmission of chess into northern Europe. Some people writing just before him had written dogmatically that the game played by Knut and Wolf was certainly hnefatafl, a different type of board game popular in Nordic countries around the ninth and tenth centuries. That interpretation implies that Snorri Sturluson (writing the "Saga of Olaf the Holy" around 1230) had modernised details to conform to the game he knew (because his account mentions a "knight" and there is no knight in European games before chess).

Writing his classic *History of Chess* (published 1913) Murray was cautious, but in later writings he seemed to have convinced himself that chess did indeed reach England some time in the eleventh century. Apart from Sturluson's saga, Murray claimed to have discovered two other independent mentions of Knut playing chess. So on page 420 he wrote "Cnut *may* have learnt chess during his pilgrimage to Rome in 1027," although he admits it was unlikely chess was generally played in England before the Norman Conquest. The main passage in Murray's book is on page 443 in which he paraphrases Sturluson's version:

*In this work our King Knut is described as playing chess in his Danish capital, Roskilde, on*

*the eve of St Michael's day, 1027, with Jarl Úlf, who had come to regain the King's favour, forfeited by a recent act of rebellion. In the course of the game Knut left his Knight en prise by mistake, and Úlf took it. Knut asked the Jarl to replace the Knight and make another move, or to allow him to recall his previous move. Úlf refused and upset the board. Hot words followed, and the quarrel ended with the murder of Úlf in the choir of the church whither he had fled for sanctuary.*

Already in a letter dated 27 November 1910, Murray had raised the Canute issue in his correspondence with Cleveland lawyer John G. White, whose reply (dated 2 February 1911) was sceptical. Murray was more dogmatic in his *Short History of Chess*, published posthumously in 1963, but written as a popular work during the First World War. On page 29 he repeated the Roskilde story and wrote: "King Cnut seems to have brought back from Rome a taste for chess and to have played it with members of his court both in Denmark and in England."

### **When exactly did all this happen?**

Murray's whole argument hinges on dates. He presumed Canute learned chess on his trip to Rome, which is the only time the king would have had contact with rulers and noblemen from southern Europe, where chess is known to have started to penetrate from the Muslim world. So a claim that Canute brought a chess set or two back to his realms and taught the game to his courtiers towards the end of his reign is plausible, but he can only have played chess with Wolf (as opposed to some other game) if the Rome trip preceded the murder.

Now it is much easier to date Canute's trip to Rome than it is to fix when the Roskilde incident occurred. This is because the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic sources are somewhat vague and contradictory, whereas it is certain that the main reason for Canute's trip was to attend the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor Conrad II. This took place at Easter 1027, so Murray's speculation would amount to this sequence: learn chess on the Rome pilgrimage and then play it later that year with Wolf.

The catch is that the most likely dating for Roskilde, according at least to some distinguished medieval scholars is 1026! Of course it is just possible Canute learned chess before going to Rome, from somebody who travelled from the south to England, but that would seem even weaker than Murray's argument.

Canute is known to have left England in late 1026 to begin his long and dangerous journey to Rome, travelling through France and visiting places of pilgrimage on the way. The trip was both religiously and politically motivated. He was showing his face to most of the crowned heads and leaders of the continent, acquiring valuable information and forging contacts and alliances for the future.

Dating the events in Denmark is much more difficult. I consulted two of my ICCF friends from Nordic countries on this question some time ago. Roald Berthelsen (a Norwegian who lives in Stockholm) told me that according to C. O. Hovind's book *Sjakk for Alle* (Oslo 1943), there are references to Snorre Sturlasons saga and Ulv Jarls death is given as 1027. Also Hartvig Nielsen's book *SKAK i tusindr*" (Copenhagen 1965) confirm, the same story to been written circa 1230.

Jørgen Axel Nielsen wrote to me from Denmark that *The Chronicon Roscildensis*, finished about 1139-40, writes on the killing and gave me an English translation:

*...After a short time he had Úlf killed in the church of Roskilde on his way to the Matutin (morning mass). Estrid his widow gave him an honourable funeral and built a stonechurch instead of the former wooden church and enriched it.*

As reason for the murder, the *Chronicon Roscildensis*, gives that Estrid, sister to Canute, had married Wolf against the will of the king and the couple was driven from the realms of Canute, but reconciliation was brought about and later broken by the king. Mr. Nielsen comments that it's

unlikely that the sister's marriage was the motive, as this took place several years earlier (around 1020). The treasonable relations between the earl and the Norwegian and Swedish monarchs are a more plausible reason, as he says.

He states that the murder took place on September 29, probably 1026, and the King had to pay wergeld to the Church and his sister, for which she built (started building) the stone church. That the murder should have happened during the Christmas time is not proven. (I agree with Mr. Nielsen here. Although I have also seen on unreliable websites like Wikipedia that Christmas is mentioned, but the feast of Michaelmas, i.e. around the end of September in the old calendar, is usually the time stated.)

Mr. Nielsen adds that the story about the murder taking place after a game (of chess) is first brought by Saxo the clerk of Absalon, bishop of Roskilde and Archbishop of Lund, writing his *Gesta Danorum* around 1200. Snorre Sturlason writing *Heimskringla* might surely have known Saxo's work and used some of the stories. He concludes that "I doubt it can be proven what year exactly the murder took place, but let it be autumn 1026 as the most likely."

### **So what about those dates?**

To remind you, Murray's theory holds water if the murder in Roskilde took place in 1027, but not if it was in 1026. To me the earlier year seems more plausible, because Canute could go back to England and on through France to Rome, knowing that he had pacified his northern kingdom by eliminating the treasonous earl. Whereas he would be taking a big risk by going south for the best part of a year while his enemies were plotting against him. But in 1026, Canute has not yet been to Rome, so he has probably not learned chess and the game he played with Wolf was therefore probably *hnefatafl*.

The feast of Michaelmas was one of the most important Christian holy days and falls on September 29, close to the autumn equinox. So, on this account, the "chess" game was played on 28 September and the Jarl was murdered the next day. This leaves time, if it was 1026, for Canute to pay his blood money, return to England and then set off for France.

The dating of the Roskilde events depends on the dating of the Battle of the Helgø (or Helgeå, or Holy River), which is known to have been some time earlier in the same year. (Sometimes said to be in 1025, see below.) This was a somewhat inconclusive naval battle, which was the culmination of an attempted Norwegian invasion of Denmark, which Wolf had earlier supported although perhaps now he was on Canute's side again. At this time the Norwegians were seeking independence under King Olaf the Holy, who was the hero of Sturluson's book (part of his "Heimskringla" cycle) in which the chess story occurs. The Swedish and Norwegian navies managed to drown many of the Danes, by bursting a dam of logs they had built in preparation, but Canute escaped and eventually won the battle and a few years later became King of Norway himself.

If the Battle of the Holy River took place in 1025, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states, or in 1026 (as seems more likely by the modern reckoning), Murray's argument fails. Only if it was in 1027 (or 1028 in one account) can the battle have followed, rather than preceded, Canute's trip to Rome. An Icelandic scholar Haki Antonsson, with whom I was put in touch by Michael Staunton of University College Dublin, told me: "The date for the killing of Ulfr is somewhat confused but it was certainly after the battle of Helgø in 1027 but when exactly is uncertain..." So if he is right about the year, then Murray could have been on the right track after all?

The English medieval scholar Frank Stenton, in his classic *Anglo-Saxon England* (third edition, Oxford 1971, especially pp. 403-4), was non-committal on dates, but wrote that English and Danish authorities alike mentioned "the essential fact" of Wolf's treason, "and there is no obvious ground for rejecting the further tradition, current throughout the north, that soon after the battle of the Holy River he was murdered by Cnut's orders." (No mention of a chess game, but that could have been deemed by Stenton to be irrelevant or an embellishment of the saga writers.)

The strongest view I have found on the dating issue by an academic medievalist was by Gwyn

Jones, in his *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford 1968) who stated categorically (on page 374) that “In 1026 it was necessary for him [Canute] to leave England and look to his Scandinavian interests again...” In a footnote on page 380, Jones addressed the dating issue directly, when discussing Canute’s deposing of the Norwegian King Olaf in 1028, as follows:

*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle puts the battle in 1025, but this is too upsetting to the chronology supplied by Scandinavian sources to be acceptable. The known fact of Olaf’s last years point to 1027 (a date skilfully defended by Campbell, *Encomium Emmae*, pp. 82ff). **But if we believe that Knut’s pilgrimage to Rome took place in 1027, we are forced to assign the battle to 1026.** (My emphasis)*

How come all this confusion over the years? Unfortunately the attempt to firm up the date is complicated by the fact that the chronicler’s year did not necessarily begin on 1 January. In fact it was only in 1752 that the law changed to make the official start of the year in England and Wales the first of January, one motive for the change being to bring them into line with Scotland. (This was the same Act of Parliament that moved England and Wales to the Gregorian calendar, removing eleven days in September. For the full story on this, read *Time’s Alteration* by the historian Robert Poole.)

Back in the Dark Ages, the year was even less fixed than in the early eighteenth century. To try to make some sense of the confusion, I consulted the 1972 edition by G. N. Garmonsway of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (first published in London, 1953). His introduction (page xxix) states that any of the following were sometimes used for the start of a year in those days:

- 25 March *preceding our 1 Jan*;
- 1 Sept: Greek or Byzantine Interdiction date;
- **24 Sept: Caesarean Interdiction Date;**
- 25 Dec (Christmas/ Midwinter’s Day);
- 1 Jan;
- **25 March following our 1 Jan.**

I hope that makes more sense to you than it does to me! Then Garmonsway fortunately simplifies matters by saying that in actual fact a, b and e were *never* used in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In most cases, he explained, c or f were used, resulting in years recorded being respectively a year too early or a year too late depending on when they occurred. Thus the solar eclipse known to have occurred on 29 October 878 by our reckoning of 878 happened too late for the year, which the chronicler closed at 23 September, so he put it down for 879.

From this, we can see that a difference of a year between two reckonings can easily occur. Also there was not just one *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; different monasteries had chroniclers, of which various manuscripts survive, and they don’t always agree. On pages 156-7 in Garmonsway, The Parker (or Winchester) and Laud (Peterborough) Chronicles agree on 1028: “In this year King Cnut sailed to Norway with fifty ships.” [*Parker only adding*: “and drove King Olaf from that country, and secured possession of it all for himself.”]

The Parker Chronicle has 1031 [evidently wrong, and corrected by the editor to 1027]: “In this year King Cnut went to Rome...” On that basis, Murray could be right, except that everything is a year later than he said, and that chronicle would put the coronation of the emperor in the wrong year.

The Laud Chronicle for 1025 (but maybe really 1026 because of dating reasons above) has:

*In this year King Cnut went to Denmark with his ships to the battle-place at the Holy River, and Úlf and Eilaf met him with a great host, both a Swedish fleet and army; and there many men perished on King Cnut’s side, both Danes and Englishmen; and the Swedes had possession of the place of slaughter.* (There was no entry in that version for 1826-7. Note that in this version Wolf is fighting against Canute in the naval battle.)

It has to be concluded that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are ambiguous for the years concerned, and also that there is some disagreement about when Wolf changed back to Canute's side! (The exact degree of relationship between the two men also varies between accounts, as we shall see below.)

What about the literary evidence? The version of Sturluson that Fiske cited (and Murray probably knew) was *Stories of the Kings of Norway*, translated and edited by William Morris and Kirikur Magnusson (London 1891). The language is rather self-consciously archaic. In volume 2, chapter 140, page 253, King Olaf complains to Canute's messengers that their master is too heavily into empire-building:

*And now it has come to this, that Knut rules over Denmark, and over England, and, moreover, has broken a mickle deal of Scotland under his sway, yet now he layeth claim to my lawful heritage at my hands.*

This explains why Olaf II Haraldsson did a deal with the Swedes to try to break his hold on Denmark. While the Norwegian and Swedish kings (who are brothers-in-law) make their alliance, Canute rather imprudently sails to England, leaving to rule Denmark in his absence his son Hordaknut [aka Hardicanute] and with him Wolf the Earl, the son of Thorkils Sprakalegg. (This is our murder victim.)

Wolf, according to this account, was wedded to Astrid, the daughter of King Svein and Canute's sister, i.e. not Canute's brother-in-law (husband of sister, as was claimed in Sir Frederick Madden's version and others) but a more distant relative (sister's son-in-law). "Wolf the Earl was a man of the greatest mark."

There was no war that year. (It says there followed the thirteenth winter of Olaf's reign. If that is right, and Olaf's reign began in 1015, then it does push the battle into the year 1028, but similar problems may well arise with Scandinavian datings as we saw with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*.)

The next year, Olaf sails forth and seeks news of Knut the Rich, and is told his enemy is in England but was "having a hosting and was minded for Norway" (Chapter 154). Olaf decides to sail south to Denmark with his best fighting men and sends the rest home. As the plot of the Swedish and Norwegian kings becomes apparent (chapters 155-6), Canute hears that "unpeace was in his realm" and sails forth with a big host, Hakon being his second-in-command. In the next chapter, Wolf (the warden of the kingdom) wants to instal Canute's young son Hardicanute as king of Denmark, pretending that Knut had given him these sealed orders. He went to Jutland with his army, but judged that he was not strong enough to face the combined Norwegian and Swedish forces in battle, so he held the army back and gathered his fleet to await the arrival of Canute.

The queen was sent to find out if Canute was angry with them or not and told him that what their son had done was not of his own counsel. Followers realised they would have to submit to Canute or flee the land. Eventually Hardicanute went to see the king his father and submit, and was pardoned, and Wolf sent his own son Svein who was of an age with Hardicanute. The king said they should meet and talk peace. In the next chapters there is a small naval action, but the main armies do not clash; this seems to be a reference to the Battle of the Holy River, and implies that Wolf was not fighting there with the Swedes and Norwegians.

The climax of the story begins with chapter 162:

*King Knut rode up to Roiswell [Røskilde] the day before Michaelmas with a great following. Earl Wolf... had arrayed a banquet for him... The earl gave him entertainment full noble, but the king was unjoyous and scowling. The earl wrought many ways to make him gleesome, but the king was short and few-spoken. The earl bade him play at the chess, and that he yeasaid, so they got them a chess-board and played. Earl Wolf was a man quick of word and unyielding in all things; he was the mightiest man in the kingdom next after King Knut.*

It sounds as if Canute had already made up his mind to rid himself of the treasonous earl, doesn't it? Chapter 163 has:

*Now when they had been playing a while at the chess, Earl Wolf checked the king's knight. The king put his move back, and bade him play another. The earl got angry, cast down the table and went away. The king said: 'Runnest thou away now, Wolf the Craven?' To which Wolf replies that: You would have taken a long flight in the river Helga, had I not come to your assistance, when the Swedes beat you like a dog. You did not then call me coward. (Fiske gave more of this in his posthumously-published book, *Chess in Iceland*. What is meant by "checking the king's knight" is unclear: it could mean a fork, or it could just mean he captured the knight left *en prise*.)*

The next morning, or in other versions a few days later, Canute takes revenge. As the king was getting dressed he said to his footman, "Go thou to Earl Wolf and slay him." But the Earl had gone to church and so the swain didn't kill him. Note that Murray's line about the earl seeking sanctuary is misleading; it was now the next day, a holy day of obligation, and they were all going to church.

So Canute gets somebody else to do the job. In the Morris and Magnusson version, it says:

*There was a man hight Ivar the White, a Norwegian of kin. The king said to Ivar: 'Go and slay the earl'. Ivar went to the church and up into the choir, and thrust a sword through the earl, and forthwith Earl Wolf lost his life. Then Ivar went to the king and had his bloody sword.*

In the following summers Canute made himself master of the north, driving out King Olaf, who died in 1030 or possibly the year before.

It seems that there is no real agreement on the dates of the events in Scandinavia and it would take a subtle master of Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon history to unravel all these contradictions. It may be impossible to find a conclusive answer, as manuscripts that could help reconcile the dating issues may not exist.

So I leave the last word on this matter with my expert adviser, Mr Antonsson:

"...About the reference to chess-playing in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. I have to say that it can hardly be used as evidence for the introduction of chess to England. We do not know what source it was that Snorri followed regarding the dispute between Knud and Úlf. This source is lost as Snorri refers to it 'as is written in the saga of Knud the Old, that he had his brother-in-law killed in Roskilde' (*Saga of Magnus the Good*, ch. 22). The story could have figured in this saga although, it is worth noting that *Fagrskinna* which also used this lost source (early thirteenth century) does not include the chess scene."

"Lauritz Weibull, the great medievalist of Scandinavian studies, wrote an article in 1922 where he pointed out similarities between the scene in *Heimskringla* and the well-known story of how Alexander the Great fell out with and killed Kleitos. Although there is no game involved in this story, it could have provided Snorri with the model for his senna or 'scene'. This is a typical scene for Snorri to have simply invented according to the need of his narrative. It is also worth noting that Saxo, writing at the end of the twelfth century, has Knud and Úlf fall out not over a game of chess but rather because the latter mocks the king's prowess in battle."

"The fact that Snorri has Úlf win Knud's knight by check is a detail that must have some underlying symbolic meaning and, I would argue, is an elaboration on the rather general information provided by Saxo and the unknown saga of Knud."

### **Tentative Conclusion**

It seems from the above that modern scholars agree with Fiske that the chess story in Sturluson can best be explained in terms of literary borrowings and cannot be taken as a true account of an historical event. There are several other cases of imitative writing of the kind suggested by Antonsson. And incidents relating to one game could easily be transposed to another: thus the anachronistic knight, and the reference to it being “checked,” can be explained away.

So there are no real grounds for considering the *Heimskringla* to be considered as evidence for chess being played by King Canute and his disloyal relative in 1026, or 1027 or 1028, whichever year it was. Independent historical evidence (Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian records) show that Canute had sufficient reason to have Wolf killed and that he did not need a row over a game to motivate him. If there was a game, it was probably *hnefatafl* but chess cannot be ruled out if – and only if – the incident occurred *after* Canute’s trip to Rome, and here the evidence seems contradictory.

If I had to come down on one side of the argument, however, I would have to accept Antonsson’s view against Jones, especially as it seems to be supported by a key sentence in Sturluson about events occurring in the thirteenth winter of Olaf’s reign, which would place the Battle of the Holy River after the coronation of Emperor Conrad. Even if there is a one-year discrepancy, as with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, that would still make Roskilde follow the coronation of the emperor. So Murray’s case is *not proven*, to use the Scottish legal term, but it is not clearly refuted either.

### **A Game of Historical Interest**

As I cannot show you the game between King Canute and Earl Wolf, or any other game by King Canute for that matter, I will finish this column with something entirely unconnected – a forgotten game played in Dublin between grandmaster Joseph Blackburne and a famous Irishman, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington (1878-1916). Irish readers probably know the story well, but for the rest of you a few sentences of introductory context may be required.



*Francis Sheehy-Skeffington*

Francis Skeffington was a left-wing journalist and pacifist who was well known to the young James Joyce, and had a falling-out with him, as a result of which he is portrayed as a character called MacCann in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

In the summer of 1903 he changed his name to Sheehy-Skeffington when he married Hannah Sheehy (1877-1946), also a pacifist and left-wing activist whose father had been a Member of

Parliament. So he had only married and changed his name a few weeks before the game below was played.

While trying to organise a group of followers to prevent looting during the Easter Week rising in 1916, on 25 April 1916 he was wrongfully arrested, used as a “human shield” and later unjustly killed by British soldiers. The officer responsible (actually an Irishman) was a Captain J. C. Bowen-Colthurst. A cover-up was attempted, but because Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington had powerful connections in the Irish parliamentary party, the case was investigated and some of the truth came out. There was some question of whether Bowen-Colthurst could be put on trial for murder; eventually he was, but found to be insane. For more details, I recommend you read *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* by Charles Townshend, an English academic from Keele University (London: Allen Lane/Penguin 2005-6), which is widely considered now to be the most authoritative, well-balanced and also highly readable account of the Easter Rising, its context and aftermath.

But, to get back to young Sheehy-Skeffington in happier days, he was (which I think may not be well known) a member of the circle who regularly played chess at the D.B.C. (Dublin Bakery Company) in central Dublin’s Sackville Street (now O’Connell Street). There was both a formal club there, said to number two hundred members, but also a wider circle of people who played casual chess. John Howard Parnell, brother of the “lost leader” Charles Stewart Parnell, is portrayed in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (in the Wandering Rocks episode) as playing chess there with Joyce’s friend Byrne. Skeffington is likely to have been another of his opponents.

In September 1903, Blackburne paid a visit to Dublin and played exhibitions at several clubs. According to the (Dublin) *Saturday Herald* (the weekend edition of the *Evening Herald*), of 24 October 1903, the following was: “A game (one of 20 played at once at the Sackville Club, 19th September, 1903, when Mr. Blackburne won 17 and drew 3) in which Mr. F. Sheehy-Skeffington introduced a novelty at the 3rd move.”

### **Joseph Blackburne – Francis Sheehy Skeffington**

Sackville Chess Club simultaneous, Dublin, 1903

Scotch Game [C44]

Notes from the *Saturday Herald*, unless otherwise indicated.

**1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 Nf6 4 dxe5 Nxe4 5 Bc4 Qe7 6 0–0 Nc5 7 Nc3 d6**

The uncomfortable position of Black’s Q and KB may have prompted this course rather than 7... Ne6.

**8 Nd5 Qd7 9 Re1 Be7**



How instantly Mr. Blackburne can penetrate the mystery of the case will be seen in the sequel.

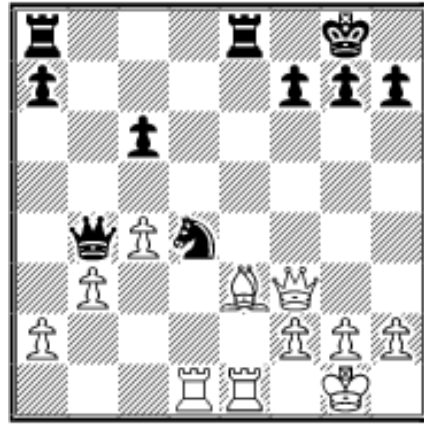
**10 Nxc7+!! Qxc7 11 exd6 Qd7 12 Bb5 Ne6! 13 dxe7 Qxe7**

Black, a pawn down, intends to fight it vigorously, and here might have adopted 13...Kxe7.

**14 Ne5 Bd7 15 Nxd7 Qxd7 16 Qf3**

“White, on the other hand, chivalrously avoids Whitechapel.” (TH: Can any reader explain that reference to a poor district of London?) “Instead of Q-B3 he might have simplified by 16 Qxd7+.”

16...0-17 Be3 Qd6 18 Rad1 Qb4 19 Bxc6 bxc6 20 b3 Rfe8 21 c4 Nd4!



“Requiring immediate attention.”

22 Qg4 Nc2 23 Re2 Nxe3 24 Rxe3 Rxe3 25 fxe3 Qc5 26 Qd4 Qe7 27 e4

First move over again.

27...Re8 28 e5!

Touch me if you dare!

28...h6

I will presently.

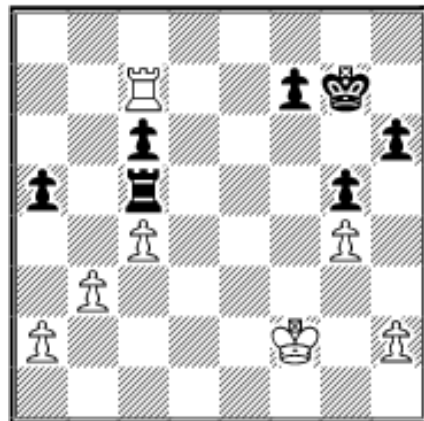
29 Qd6

Ha! You still dare me!

29...Qxe5 30 Qxe5

TH: Of course not 30 Qxc6?? Qe3+ 31 Kh1 (31 Kf1 Qe2+ 32 Kg1 Qxd1+ and wins) 31...Qe1+ 32 Rxe1 Rxe1 mate.

30...Rxe5 31 Rd7 a5 32 Rc7 Rc5 33 Kf2 g5 34 g4 Kg7



“At this point,” writes Mr. S. (who kindly furnished us with the score), Mr. Blackburne offered a draw... had I heard the offer I would have been glad to snap at it.”

35 Ke3 Kf6?

TH: Presumably Blackburne had offered the draw because he was concerned that 35...Re5+ gives Black counterplay: 36 Kf3 (36 Kd4 Re2) 36...Re6 37 Ra7 although White still stands better.

36 Kd4 Re5 37 Rxf7+ Kxf7 38 Kxe5 Ke7 39 c5!

Gaining opposition.

39...Kd7 40 Kf6 Kc7 41 Ke7 Kc8 42 Kd6 Kb7 43 a4 Kc8 44 Kxc6 1-0

An interesting game throughout, and fair basis for the calculation of Mr. Blackburne’s three hours’ work. He played in that time twenty such games.

### Correction to Last Column

I had a little feedback to the Morra Gambit [column](#) last month. Karsten Müller points out that actually Hannes Langrock’s [book](#) does deal with the 6...Nf6 variation on pages 85-96. It’s true I did find the book’s index and variation layout confusing at times, with variations not being where I expected to find them. This does not affect my evaluation of the line; Hannes apparently agrees

with me that 7 e5 is the critical reply.

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